

OFFICE OF STATEWIDE HEALTH PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT**HEALTHCARE QUALITY AND ANALYSIS DIVISION****Healthcare Information Resource Center**

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March 19, 2003

Dear Public Patient Discharge Data User:

As a past requester of the public patient discharge datasets, we want to update you on the continued availability of public patient discharge data. As you are probably aware, in September of 2002 the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development (Office) temporarily suspended release of both public versions of the patient discharge dataset pending development and testing of a single public dataset that minimizes disclosure risk. Release of these public datasets was suspended out of concern for the confidentiality of personally identifiable patient information. A report by the University of California confirmed this concern.

The Office has been collecting, using, and disseminating patient discharge data for over 20 years. We are committed to making this important source of healthcare information available to the healthcare industry, as well as the general public. However, we must always be mindful of the statutory mandates that require us to protect patient confidentiality.

In the last 20 years, there has been an increased sophistication of both technology and data users. It has become increasingly easy to manipulate data and to link or relate it to other data. The result is increasing risk that information about individual patients can be identified within a patient-level data set, even one in which direct identifiers such as name have been removed. This has led us to a re-evaluation of our standard A and B public patient-level data products.

The recent past has seen the issue of privacy rise in the popular consciousness. HIPAA has brought renewed attention to issues of disclosure of individual health information. Although the Office is not covered by HIPAA, we believe that the HIPAA standards on de-identification of data are useful to consider. The federal government has developed these standards and they do apply to most of the healthcare industry.

At this time, the Office is working very hard to develop information and data products that will continue to meet the needs of our many data users while respecting the confidentiality of identifiable patient data. Our goal is to make useful and needed healthcare information available.

After receiving extensive input from many of our data users, the Office is finalizing the development of an interim public patient level file that would be publicly available to data requesters without an extensive request process or data element justification requirement. This single public file is being developed using a masking technique that

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masks values for certain demographic data elements from unique patient records. A description of this file is attached. This interim public file for the 2001 discharge data will be available for order by the beginning of April 2003. We are committed to continuing our work with data users as we assess the information needs in light of this new public file. The cost for the public file will be \$200. If you are interested in ordering this file, contact Louise Hand at:

Phone: (916) 322-2814
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e-mail: lhanda@oshpd.state.ca.us.

We welcome your comments once you have worked with the public file and solicit your detailed input if it does not meet your data needs.

Sincerely,



Diane Dargan, Manager
Healthcare Information Resource Center

Attachment: Public File Description